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DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH MAJOR GENERAL WALTER E. GASKIN, COMMANDER, MULTINATIONAL FORCES-WEST VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA):
General Gaskin.

GEN. GASKIN: How are you?

MR. HOLT: Very good, sir. Thank you for joining us this morning. Major General W.E. Gaskin, commanding general of Multinational Force-West, the Al Anbar province in Iraq, joining us for the Bloggers Roundtable this morning.

Good morning, sir, and hope this morning finds you well. And do you have an opening statement for us?

GEN. GASKIN: Well, I'd just like to say that the progress that you've been hearing and reading about in Anbar is real; that we have gotten the tribal engagement, we've seen economic development; and we have increased the size of the military, that includes the police, the actual army, border, and the highway patrol, all because of the indigenous folks, the young Anbaris, sons of Anbaris, have joined the military to work for the destruction of al Qaeda and the defense of their nation.

So I am very optimistic about where we are going and the progress that we are making in Al Anbar.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir, thank you very much. And with that, we'll open it up to some questions.

Andrew, you were first on the call.

So once again I'd like to remind you to please state your name and your publication, and we'll get started.

Andrew.

Q Be happy to, sir. General, Andrew Lubin. Good to talk to you again, sir.

GEN. GASKIN: Good talking to you.

Q I'm sorry, from ON Point. General, can you talk to us about the economic aspects of Anbar? When I was there the banks were starting to open, people were starting to get jobs, unemployment was dropping. But I'm a couple of months out, so perhaps you could talk to us about what's happening recently.

GEN. GASKIN: Well, I think a couple of things that are very important that have happened as far as economic development, one is that we have embedded PRTs, provincial reconstruction teams, that are a combination of State Department and DOD; those who have expertise in microfinance, agriculture, those who have expertise in governmental, as well as economically building budgets and requesting monies. They have also been able to help us work with state-owned enterprises, such as the Ramadi factory, the ceramic factory in Ramadi.

This has done a lot for economic bill. It hasn't done as much as we'd like yet for employment. Probably the largest employer right now of Anbaris is the military or the Iraqi security forces. There are 21,000 of police, 34,000 in all that include police, army and highway patrol.

So we want to get those state-owned enterprises opened. We want to increase the vo-tech which we have operating in three cities: Ramadi, Fallujah and al Qaim. We want to continue to hire contractors, Iraqi contractors, for rubble removal, for fixing the plumbing that involves the water and sewage. And we want to get the Iraqis working back into agriculture.

So those are coming, and that's why I'm optimistic that we have turned the corner. Because of the security situation, we are able to do those things.

Q Great, thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Jarred.

Q Yes, sir, good afternoon, thanks for all your efforts.

We're seeing the tremendous progress in Ramadi, Fallujah, Tall Afar. We see pictures of how it looked six months ago with the rubble everywhere and now clean streets, men working in the streets.

How can we then convince the American public that the changes we're making out in Anbar, which even CNN and Barbara Starr are reporting as unbelievable -- how can we see that transition towards Diyala, Salahuddin, all the other provinces and get that message out to the American people?

GEN. CARDON: I think what you will see is that everything in Iraq is tribal. Full acceptance of that will allow you to have the inner threads that will bind all the Iraqis despite the fact that a lot of -- (inaudible) -- sectarian violence, Sunni versus Shi'a. If you look

at what's happening in the northern area around Diyala, that the tribal awakening is occurring there too as it has out in Anbar and that those tribal leaders who will bring forth the -- those that join the military and the police -- the police are the key to the stability of the cities and the population centers.

So I don't think that everything that we do in Anbar is exportable. But I think there is a couple of common threads that me and my fellow commanders talk about. And that is that if we can secure the cities and the cities are secured by police, we can in fact get al Qaeda out or, in their case, JAM or whatever insurgent group, if we can get those out of the cities and away from the people, out in the hinterland, we can deal with them there.

But once you bring security to the cities, not only do you get economic development but you get human intelligence on where everybody is, where the IEDs are, where the factories are, torture factories, I mean. So it's a start of our Iraqis being Iraqis and not being allowed to develop into sectarianism or regionalism but actually a chance to come together.

And I've seen some of those tribes out in Anbar reach out to the tribes both in Karbala, Najaf and up into Diyala.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Grim.

Q Thank you, sir. This Grim of Blackfive.net.

GEN. GASKIN: How are you?

Q I notice your initial degree was from Savannah State University, and that kind of focuses on the question I'd like to ask you, as a very successful Marine general. I get questions from people who are just going to OCS, will be going to Quantico. And I wonder if you -- you know, they ask us for advice, but we're not really the people who they should be asking, the people like you. So for the future Marine lieutenants that have been writing me lately, eager to get involved in the kind of thing that you guys are doing, do you have any advice for them in terms of what they should be reading, how they should be preparing for the conflicts of the sort that you expect to be fighting in the future?

GEN. GASKIN: Well, I think if you look at -- and as you well know, I started out with an ROTC scholarship and I went to OCS. I also most recently, prior to this job I have now, was the head of Marine Corps recruiting, so I can tell you exactly what to tell the young men and women who want to become lieutenants in the Marine Corps and how they can prepare themselves.

What I've found out is, this is truly, truly the best generation of our generation. The Millennium kids have a feeling that they want to do something better themselves and they want to be challenged. How that they can prepare themselves or have a propensity toward the military is that they look at the military not as some type of foreign object, but as an integral part of our society. The same way

they'd look at it if they were joining the police force or the firemen, joining the military can provide them opportunities.

Historically, the Marine Corps has been a small-wars operation. We have always read and done things that dealt with the ability to go and to be ready when our nation is least ready. We're an expeditionary organization, be prepared to go first, and therefore, it requires that we have those who think, are strong of character, and who believe in their country. It is those intangibles that we get about service to our nation is what will drive them toward the Marine Corps. Leadership is what we give to our nation and return to society.

So those who want to join the Marine Corps should understand that we demand a lot of you; but that is not a hard thing, because this generation gives a lot. And so I just tell them to study hard and to read about the history of our nation and how our nation has interacted throughout the world. That will more than prepare them for service in the Marine Corps.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: David Axe.

Q General, this is David Axe with Military.com --

GEN. GASKIN: Hi, David.

Q -- Wired, and Aviation Week. Hi, how are you?

General, indications are that foreign extremists are still getting across that border with Syria. What are we doing to plug those holes?

GEN. GASKIN: I think one of the things that we have done -- and we've seen it cut down foreign extremists a lot -- two years ago we were having maybe 400 or so foreign extremists that were captured or killed. Last year we had about 96, and to date we only have about 26.

But the -- I think that's not to say that many aren't coming but they aren't coming the same way.

One of the things that we have been able to do by shutting down the population centers, they no longer provide (way-in ?) stations, network as they would come in through predominantly the Syrian border, follow along the Euphrates River on their way to either Ramadi, Fallujah or Baghdad. And we haven't been able to shut those down because they can't come into the cities and declare jihad or intimidate the people, confiscate or take over businesses or have them pay for businesses or some type of criminal enterprise.

So it is very difficult. And based on the intel that we have collected, it's becoming very difficult for them to now do that same route; they have to do a very (circuitous ?) route, either along the Tigris River Valley or along the southern route and then shoot up into the northern area of Iraq, come all the way around Baghdad. And

if they're headed for Ramadi, that's the route to do; if they're headed for Baghdad, they go that way.

So I think we are making it very, very difficult for al Qaeda in Iraq to operate and therefore limiting those that come. Most of the foreign fighters that we see are suicide guys. We saw very few, very few Iraqis who were in the suicide business. So when we see suicide indication, that kind of gives a feel for how many are coming, and we haven't seen that many -- or at least they haven't raised their ugly heads out because of the fact that we haven't moved them out of the cities.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And Charlie Quidnunc.

Q Yes, General. This is Charlie Quidnunc at the Wizbang Podcast. My question deals with al Qaeda and how the Marines are able to determine, after a safe house is discovered, that these are members of al Qaeda and not some other splinter group. What evidence is gathered at the scene of a fight that could lead to you believe that it's al Qaeda and not some other group?

GEN. GASKIN: Well, you know, I say this -- and I'm not being facetious -- that the -- most of the dumb ones are dead. So the ones that we capture or detain usually have some type of directions, contacts that they were going to make along the way stations, areas that they're going to train or they have cell phones with a million numbers on them or they have notebooks or diaries or journals or they just plain talk. I mean, once they get captured, they just sing, and so you're able to track their routes that they came.

That's how I know that they have basically trained in Iraq. We have discovered information that says that it is difficult coming through Anbar and as they can't get into the cities to hide out among the populace, that has ruined their way of doing it. So we know that they are adaptable, so we are assuming that they are going to find other ways. We are doing some things to interdict that because they're not coming into cities, they're out in the desert in the wadis and hinterland.

But the intel that we get, whether that's from human intelligence or signal intelligence, we are able to put together the story of most of these -- the characters, either by who they associate with or what type of transportation they use to get in, or how -- frankly, how they got into the country -- all of that we're able to put together. What we'd like to be able to do is be ahead of the ball game rather than, you know, doing site exploitation. And you'd be surprised that when we actually go into some of these places where they are building IEDs or where they are living, how much information, you know, that they have on site, from computers to phones to journals that we can actually get information from.

Q Great. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Did someone else join us late? Has everybody had a chance?

Do we have any follow-up questions?

Q I have a quick follow-up question, sir. We see people back here in the States saying: Well, even if we're defeating al Qaeda, big deal, the real problem is going to be the Sunnis, even if we're giving them weapons and arming them in Anbar, they're just going to turn against the Shi'a the day after we leave, and so it's still going to be a civil war, and so this is all hopeless.

What would your response be to how the Sunnis are now being integrated into one Iraq?

GEN. GASKIN: Let me tell you, probably because they -- we haven't listened very well to al Qaeda, which stated as one of their objectives is to create the impression, if not the action, of resentment between the Sunnis and the Shi'as. If you talk to the Sunnis in Anbar, and about 99 percent of my area is Sunni, if you talk to them, they won't talk about Shi'a-Sunni relationships. The two divisions that I have out there in my area, half of them are Shi'a.

This idea that they can't live together is not.

Now, the other side of it, the Sunnis out inside Anbar, some of them are still in denial. They remember the days of old and they recognize that Sunni as a sect is the most popular of their region with other countries that border Iraq. So they haven't gotten over the fact yet that there are Shi'a sect that is in the national government.

But they don't see it to the point where it's the civil war that we hear, you know, that we're in the middle of a civil war. Well, I'm not. What I am in the middle of is training Iraqis to be in charge of their own destiny, whether that's in the military or in the government. And they very much would like to do that.

This is the most difficult government on the planet. It's just stovepiped in the way it's organized, so that all the goods and services comes through these ministers or through the governor, who is more of a CEO than a governor, because the provincial council is elected and then they appoint a governor.

So the process, just getting them to understand the process and how difficult politics is is somewhat challenging. But it's not about sectarianism as much as power sharing and getting a part of what they feel is rightfully theirs. That's why they're concerned about the hydrocarbon laws, de-Ba'athification, you know. So these are important political issues that will aid in the reconciliation.

Now, we must not forget that the government is very young, as well, and makes sometimes what I think are very junior mistakes in

now it handles this reconciliation thing or power sharing with those that are in Anbar. But I think that this is -- this is not anywhere close to a civil war, but it is as political as it's going to be.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir. Anybody else?

Q Yeah, Jack. Can I follow up?

MR. HOLT: Sure.

Q General, Andrew Lubin again. Is the government of Iraq still basically screwing the Sunnis in Anbar? Are they still withholding funds and paying much less than they were -- than they promised?

GEN. GASKIN: I think they have gotten -- Andrew, I think they've gotten a lot better. Again, this is a very young government, and sometimes it's dysfunctional, added by the fact of Shi'a.

Shi'a and the relationship like we -- they see it is is that they want to make it a sectarian war. This is about Shi'a power. A good analogy is like having Republicans versus Democrats. They avow that they Democrats are in charge of the legislature; that's how the Shi'as are. They are not willing to make any concessions because they remember how it was when the Sunnis were in.

The Sunnis, on the other hand, (who ?) are probably the most disorganized of the sects, more disorganized than the Kurds, more disorganized than the Shi'a -- of course, that's the way Saddam wanted them -- are now trying to find how to get involved in the political process. They resent very much not voting in the -- or just boycotting the election in 2005, because now they realize that it's -- politically it's how they're going to get resources.

Now, the government failed to pay the police correctly, failed to get hiring orders for the army -- much better. It's a bureaucratic process. But if you are a Sunni out here, you see it as the government is not reacting well; well, it's not that as much as they are just a bureaucratic junior amateur at the business. And so we have been able to help them some in that process. Matter of fact, between Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus, they have been able to get the prime minister and the ministers understanding that the old way is different, that is has to be requested and fed down through the director general. So we are beginning to get the monies for projects and for fixing of the sewages, highways, schools and hospitals that they have been requesting. These are the major projects that they have been asking the government (for ?), and we are (sensing ?) that Governor Ma'Mun, who is although a very brave man, has very little experience at being a governor, is beginning to learn that process and is doing a much, much better job of connecting with all of the people to include the sheikhs and becoming that connecting (fob ?) between the provincial government and the national government.

Q Okay, thanks. Do you know if Governor Ma'Mun will be at the

governors conference next week?

GEN. GASKIN. Yes, he has every intention. As a matter of fact, he was down visiting the governor in Karbala. He will -- because we want to show that there is a relationship between the Shi'a province and Anbar province. So, yes, he will be there because he thinks that the only way to get the government to understand that it has to administer to the 18 provinces is to have the governors there and saying that they understand the process and make it much simpler for them to get their budgets and to actually obligate their budgets.

Q Great, okay. We will talking with -- Jack, do we have time for one more? General, do you have time for a second?

MR. HOLT: Yes. Yeah, go ahead.

Q Okay. Guys, do you mind? (Slight pause.) Okay. General, we were talking with Brigadier General Cardon earlier, and the impression we got from him is that on a local level, things are going relatively well.

And he's talking more South Baghdad, Babil and that area and that. But when the GOI gets involved, things go to hell, be it, you know, Shi'a versus Sunni or incompetence or because of their new government.

On a local level, things do -- again, these are his words. Things are going smoothly and they're trying and they're getting all the HUMINT. GOI gets involved, and things just stop working. Are you seeing the same thing overall?

GEN. CARDON: Well, the thing is that the reason why they are that is that I see one of the things that we have to help where there's the connection between, say, provincial and municipal governments to the national government. Right now that -- only connections between those two entities is the governor or the director generals at every level up to the ministers. And some things that are done by the ministers are absolutely done, we believe, because of the Shi'a-Sunni fear of not the religious sects fear, political -- and that's what I think -- a lot of people understand is that this is not a religious sort of division; this is a political division of who has the power.

So some of the things they do to make sure that they don't advance, and what I like to remind everybody is that Saddam Hussein had a tough time with Anbar. Anbar has always been a sort of independent spirit, not wanting anyone to actually completely control them. But he provided them resources and often paid the sheikhs well to keep the folks going.

So locally once we got the sheikhs to understand that how you get in the political process is by having your representatives on the city council, having your representatives on the municipal council and oh, by the way as soon as we get the provincial election, you will have your representatives across Anbar on the provincial seat so that they can actually influence what monies that come in to the

governor and through all of the political monies that are part of their budget.

So I see at the level growing at the same time for me in Anbar. At the same time, I see that they're permissible and provincial. I have seen a quantum leap in Governor Mamoun's ability, although he was our IP -- has now reached out to all Anbaris.

And I told him the other day that he acts -- he's acting very presidential. Because he moves about Anbar and meet with his mayors and meet with the provincial membership. And he's had three meeting of the provincial council. And they had meetings to discuss the business of the province and the money budgets, so I think -- and economic development.

So I think this is growing equally at every level. My concern is that he stays focused on how to stay connected with -- and as he meets with his director-generals, with the prime minister and the prime minister's representatives to the province.

Q One quick question, sir, if I could just get in the last second. Sheikh Sattar al-Rishawi, you know, had a lot of good press here in the States, and the Anbar Salvation Council. And I guess people are just kind of wondering, is this too good to be true? Is he really going to be someone who will view the United States as positive, once we leave, and will continue to function, you know, as part of the new Iraq? Or is it going to be just kind of the Sunni rump state that they're trying to create?

GEN. GASKIN: No, I think Sheikh Sattar is very real. You have to realize that Sheikh Sattar has a personal interesting in fighting al Qaeda. They killed his father and his brother. Sheikh Sattar's mother is Shi'a, so he's bridged that gap, and he has reached out even to Sadr. He doesn't agree with Sadr on the primary issue, and that is the removal of coalition forces, but he does believe that some nationalism should occur and that all should be all-Iraqi.

Sheikh Sattar, however, on the sheikh thing, Sheikh Sattar is a junior sheikh. So what I deal with out here in Anbar is that Sheikh Sattar, unlike Sheikh Meshim (ph) or Sheikh Anbar or Sheikh Kurdi, is not a hereditary heir to the throne, so to speak. So he is a junior sheikh who has rose to prominence because of, one, American media; and two, American senators and congressman all talking to him because he has been very sincere that anybody sheds any blood of an American or a coalition force is his enemy and they might as well shed the blood of his family. And he has demonstrated that over and over again.

However, my job is to make sure that the other sheikhs feel that their contributions -- and they are doing the same thing that the does -- is recognized. So I don't see Sheikh Sattar or any of the other sheikhs as ever wanting to go back to where they were. I see them talking about what happens after the coalition leaves and how do they get involved in the governmental process, and how do they get involved in the Iraqi contracts for the rebuilding of their province.

So I think it's -- Sattar is real, is the short answer to your question.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thank you very much. Do you have any closing comments for us? We're just about out of time here.

GEN. GASKIN: Well, I guess I'd just say this -- the one question that nobody asked me, that I was kind of expecting, is how long does all this take? I'd like to say that what is taking long is that -- the ability to grow capacity into the Iraqi security forces because we took them down to zero, and you cannot buy experience, and so you can't fast forward, experience.

You have to grow. And this is the only army in the world that has been asked to grow while at war. Most armies train and then go to war. This army, this police is at war and training at the same time. What we have given them in a number of a capacity to learn from us, for us to train them, for us to fight with them as they grow in this capacity.

That's what takes long. That's what has brought down the level of violence as their experience grows. So that's why it's hard to say. Sometimes it's like watching paint dry. But I do believe that the Iraqis are very much interested in taking charge of their own destiny.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you very much. Major General W. Gaskin, commanding general of Multinational Force-West and Al Anbar province. Thank you very much for joining us, sir, and we look forward to carrying on this discussion, perhaps, in a couple of weeks or so.

GEN. GASKIN: I'll look forward to it.

MR. HOLT: All right.

GEN. GASKIN: Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Q Thank you, General.

GEN. GASKIN: Thank you, sir.

END.